

FEATURE

Former POWs reminisce, reunite at base picnic

Story and photos by
Lt. Col Ed Memi
437 AW Public Affairs

Being shot eight times, laying severely wounded in a snow covered field in France for four days, forced to look at your dead comrades by the Germans and then imprisoned for 18 months in a hospital is not an experience for the weak-hearted. It is, however, a reminder of the sacrifices that former prisoners of war made for future generations.

Former prisoners of war and their families met at the base picnic grounds to share these kinds of experiences as part of the 5th annual Ralph E. Johnson Veterans Hospital Salute Sept. 15, for National POW/MIA Recognition Day. The picnic serves as an opportunity for about 30, mostly World War II POWs, to catch up on old times and fondly remember those who passed away. The picnic has been held on the base for the past four years and had about 90 people in attendance, to include families.

The injured POW who lay in that field was 19-year-old Army Sgt. James Boswell, now 80, and living in Mount Pleasant, but still having difficulty walking from those injuries when he served with a rifle company in Gen. George Patton's Third Army in France. "I was conscious the whole time and had to drag myself. I thought that my fellow soldiers would attack the next day and I would be discovered. They never came and a German soldier accidentally stepped on me. My whole right side was shot up from my arms to my feet.

"I knew we were in trouble because the Germans had cut the communications lines, we started

digging in and they had zeroed in on all of us and then all hell broke loose," Boswell continued. "We had got to hand-to-hand fighting and I tried to get away from them when I was shot," he said. "I had to drag myself away since I was covered up in limbs and the snow was very deep. I was the only one that survived."

Boswell said he still has six bullets in his body. "If you didn't give them something, they would kick you in the back with those steel toe shoes, and now, arthritis has set in. It is still painful." His mission for that fateful day was to survey the Germans since they were going to attack them the next day. "We were on patrol to see what we were facing and we saw it firsthand."

Among his experiences as a prisoner, he describes the episode of a German doctor who was living in New York, but while visiting his family in Germany was forced to stay and treat the sick and wounded. The doctor tended to Boswell's wounds as a prisoner. "This doctor saved my life and didn't cut off my leg. I used to get a Christmas card from him every year and I would send him one too. He came back to New York after the war ended, but has since passed away.

"I weighed 180 pounds when I was captured and when I was liberated 18 months later when the Third Armored Division captured the Germans, I weighed only 98 pounds. It was a rough experience," Boswell said.

Boswell was held in several POW camps in Germany. "It was a beautiful thing to see those tanks come rolling in," he said. Boswell says most people appreciate the sacrifices that POWs made for their country and one of his sons even joined the Air Force and eventually retired in San Antonio, Texas.

Charles Murray, a former POW and Low-Country chapter president of the POW/MIA association, spoke about the long-standing support of the veteran's administration and the strong medical support that they provide. "You worked very hard to take care of us and are always willing to help us. We appreciate it, and you (VA) have become part of our family. You have lived up to our motto: 'we help those who cannot help themselves.'"

Summerville resident Thomas Byers, who was a 21-year-old sergeant and a nose gunner on a B-24, had the experience of jumping out of his aircraft after it fell from the pack of bombers after being hit by some German flak. The bombers



Thomas Byers, former POW and Summerville resident, spent six-and-a-half months in a prison camp in Barth, Germany.

were attacking a ball-bearing plant.

"We were bombing Brexten, Czechoslovakia, a ball-bearing works and it was the last mission," said Byers. "We had hit it heavy and had put it out. We were flying what we called 'tailend charlie' and had a photographer on board to take pictures. By the time we got there, the 88's had our range and shot out our gas lines. I bailed out into the mountains of Yugoslavia." All 11 airmen survived after bailing out of the aircraft.

Byers spent six-and-a-half months in a prison camp in Barth, Germany, but said the roughest part was the trip to the camp. "The Germans would line us up in many of the villages which had been bombed by our aircraft to be shot. I thought we were going to get shot a couple of times and the villagers were very angry with us. The man in charge of us was a German Luftwaffe lieutenant and he really protected us."

Byers stays in touch with his former POWs and aircrew members. Many have since passed away, but he looks forward to the POW picnic at the base each year.

"It's like a reunion every year and it is awful nice of the base to accept us here," Byers said. "We have our meetings every month and stay in touch with former POWs. I've had my tailgunner come and see me and several have called me."

Reginald Salisbury, age 75, was a 19-year-old private first class in the 35th Infantry Division when he was captured behind enemy lines as a

scout near Mortan, Germany. He had previously landed on Omaha Beach, but was captured when they went to the aide of soldiers who had been in the woods for more than 30 days. He spent 10 months as a prisoner in Munich, Germany.

"I would go on a milk or potato wagon back and forth to work as a prisoner," said Salisbury. "I would get a Red Cross parcel once in a while and it would have a chocolate bar in it. We would trade the cigarettes for bread and the chocolate bar we would cut up into little pieces and toss to the children that would follow behind us when riding on the wagon. In 1977, my wife and I went back there and I met one of the kids that had received that chocolate.

"We get together and talk," continued Salisbury. "You can't tell these stories to the average Joe, because they don't believe you. I can tell a former POW my story and he'll understand immediately."

"You don't see a happier bunch of people than ex-POWs, because we know how to enjoy freedom. I enjoy every day that I live," concluded one former POW.



U.S. Third Army patch



James Boswell, former POW and Mount Pleasant resident, was shot eight times and still has six bullets in his body.